

Norm-referenced assessment

In norm-referenced assessments there are two main groups to which comparisons are made. If the test is standardised to the wider population (e.g. a national test or public examination of the whole population of 16-year-olds) then the individual's result can be placed at a point relative to the national norm. In many teacher-devised assessment it is the group or cohort that is the group to which reference is made (e.g. a class), in which case comparisons can only be made to those in the class in question.

In a norm-referenced test at the end of a course it may be decided in advance that 5 per cent of the students will gain grade A, 20 per cent will gain grade B, 40 per cent will gain grade C, 20 per cent will gain grade D, 10 per cent will gain grade E and 5 per cent will fail. One can see implicit in this the bell-shaped curve of distribution. Now, let us say that the test was conducted on two successive years. In the first year the group was generally very bright; the required percentages were placed in the various grade groups as required. When the test was taken in the second year the group was generally very poor; nevertheless the requirements for percentages receiving particular grades was the same, so the same percentage of the poor year achieved an A grade as for the bright year, i.e. the grade A meant something different for each year. We can have 'a good year' and 'a bad year' of students, even though the grades awarded adhere to the same distributions. Even if you think that this is unfair and that it does not correctly differentiate the bright from the poor students year on year, then recall that, in the days of the 11-plus examination, this was how the test was administered. It is a mechanism that is used when places in élite institutions (e.g. grammar schools, top universities) may be limited. Indeed, if we have two schools, one of which is very poor and the other which is very good, it might behave the poor school to adopt norm-referencing as it *guarantees* a proportion of grade As, Bs, Cs, Ds, Es, and a tiny number of failing students regardless of their actual ability, and this could put that school in a favourable light.